

CHRISTIAN DRAMA

Journal of the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain
founded in 1929

by Sir Francis Younghusband, K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E., and Mrs. O. Stevenson

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Editorial

It was with a deep sense of loss that we heard of Colonel Grant's death at the end of March, while he was on a visit to South Africa. Colonel Grant was one of the staunchest supporters of our Society, who gave faithful service from its earliest days. Tributes by some who worked most closely with him are printed elsewhere in this number of *Christian Drama*.

May we again give a reminder that bookings for the Summer School should be made without delay.

For the Annual General Meeting to be held on Saturday, 2nd November, we are trying to arrange two short arena productions. The place of meeting and other details will be sent out later. The meeting has been arranged for a Saturday (beginning at 11 a.m.) as the result of many requests, and we hope that this will make for an increased attendance.

Early in May, we had as a visitor to Headquarters, Dr. Olov Hartman of the Sigtuna Foundation in Sweden. We were pleased that Dr. Hartman, who was in England for a Church Conference, found time to renew a friendship begun at the International Conference, and to bring with him some of his fellow delegates.

The Christian Drama Council of Canada is now taking 500 copies of *Christian Drama* for distribution to its members. The scheme is being tried for a year, and was arranged with Headquarters by Mr. Leonard Drainford, formerly one of our Executive Committee, and now Technical Adviser to the C.D.C.C. We are glad to have this link with our Canadian members, and hope that it may prove a permanent arrangement.

We record our thanks to members who, by undertaking the local organisation, made several Short Courses possible. Miss Robins tutored Schools at Clitheroe, in March, and Cinderford, in May, the first organised by Miss M. Gradwell, and the second by Miss M. Addis. Miss N. Bell made the arrangements for the Putney Course, in May, tutored by Miss Nicholl. For a recent campaign tour in Bristol made by Miss Robins (including seven meetings in three days), the preparatory work was done by Miss E. Moore, to whom we offer our thanks. May we hope for similar member activity elsewhere?

We are pleased to say that the Council has been able to secure the services of the Rev. John Hester as Editor of *Christian Drama*. He will take over his new duties with the Autumn number.

Drama and Theology

DANIEL ATGER

*Pasteur, Presbyterian Church of France. President of the Commission
Art Dramatique des Equipes Unionistes. Dramatist.*

For centuries the artist and the theologian have been turning a deaf ear to one another. It would be more exact to say that they have been living in a state of mutual disregard; and there is no need to look beyond this lack of comprehension in search of the origin of the reserve and mistrust by which theology and drama are condemned to a dangerous divorce.

It is always dangerous for theology to utter anathemas or to regard any sphere of human activity as outside its scope. Therefore we can only rejoice, whether from the theologians' or the artists' point of view, when we perceive that a fresh exchange of views is beginning. This cannot fail to benefit theology as well as art.

A distinction should be made between the *negative* and the *positive* reservations which traditional theology makes with regard to drama. The negative ones, which have their origin in the lack of comprehension already mentioned, ought to be abandoned once for all. The positive ones are an invaluable guide which the Christian dramatist would be wrong to neglect. His gift, if he has one, will lose nothing by this, and his art will find in the legitimate reservations of theology an opportunity for purification and humility.

The reservations of a "moral" kind which certain theologians have expressed in regard to the theatre I consider to be negative. When Calvin (who never formulated a condemnation in principle) asserted that "people are tempted to think that all the passions represented on the stage can be justified in daily life" (a moral argument taken up a century later by Pascal*), he was ignoring one of the fundamental laws of the stage: drama is the "purgation" of passions, the true social catharsis.

We will lose no time, either, over the puritan objections concerning the immorality of the theatre and of actors, nor over the alleged breach of the Second Commandment. These cannot stand up to an objective knowledge of the theatre or an honest exegesis of the Decalogue.

But there are other more valid objections, which ought to be taken into consideration by theologians and by artists. The first is concerned with the artist's *demiurgic temptation*. André Gide used to say that there is no art without the collaboration of the devil. This assertion, which must not be taken literally, contains one part of truth. There may be in art—particularly dramatic art—a demiurgic pretension on man's part, a temptation to presumption in that man takes God's place to some extent, and wills to exert his creative power to re-make—

*"All large-scale amusements are dangerous for the Christian life, but of those which the world has invented, none is more to be feared than the theatre

unmake—the world after his own fashion. The Christian dramatist, aware of this temptation to pride, must always hold in reverence, with proper artistic humility, the mystery of creation which has its only source in God. God alone gives life to the created world, and the vocation of man is to “give names to” the creatures and to tend and nurture creation for its original destiny.

A second reservation is concerned with the *religious temptation* of drama. We all know that drama is of religious origin; it was born of man's wish to assure for himself the favour of the gods, at first by magic and later by incantation. The finest dramas of Greek tragedy, for instance, are admirable liturgies. What are the *Eumenides* or the *Choephoroe*, but sacrifices, sung Masses, ritual celebrations?

One can even maintain that in becoming secular the drama has degenerated considerably. Certain modern experiments, even when they are made by atheists, tend to make drama into a religion and the theatre into a church requiring fervent communion of the audience.

The theologian must put the dramatist and the artist on their guard against this temptation, which is inherent in a self-sufficient art. There is undoubtedly another way besides the “sanctification” of the drama, to restore greatness and vitality to the dramatic enterprise. The most valuable contribution of a dramatist like Bertolt Brecht to the contemporary theatre is surely that he has succeeded in *deritualising* the theatre while restoring its social function and its universal dimension. To these two chief reservations must be added a third, addressed specially to Christian dramatists who are disposed to offer their art for the service of the Church: a different kind of temptation threatens them. It will call it the *utilitarian temptation*.

Some writers, indeed, would be quite ready to regard the stage as a pulpit in order to make a final reconciliation between the Church and the theatre. They think that Christian preaching, to be effective, must use other means of expression than public worship or the Sunday service. From this preoccupation, very praiseworthy in itself, has sprung “Christian” Drama, a kind of sacred monster, the offspring of too hasty reconciliation between art and the Church.

The Christian artist seeking to communicate his faith will be in greater danger than any other of falling into the temptation which art forbids: the simplification and schematisation of propaganda, however disinterested.

If the Church were always faithful to its special mission, to its apostolic ministry, which is to bear witness, it would have more authority with which to remind Christian artists that God asks of them something other than “lending a hand” with the evangelisation of the masses. In a word, their vocation as artists or dramatists is elsewhere.

In fact, the first *service* which theology has the right to expect from Christian dramatist or artist is *praise*. And there is nothing more gratuitous or disinterested than an act of praise.

A Christian artist, who respects his art and will never regard it as a

mere *means* of expression, cannot cut his faith out of his artistic activity; for the art exists because of the faith; his faith gives meaning to his life and also to his art. If faith consisted only of a belief, a set of dogmas or prejudices accepted or received because of external pressure, the position would evidently be different; but then the problem would not arise. We can call him a Christian author, or Christian artist, who consciously acknowledges the authority and the presence of Christ in the whole of life, and is ready to submit his art to Him, to glorify Him by this art. And it is of the nature of faith to tend to expand and to radiate.

This expansion, which through art becomes praise and worship, does not present any particular problem. Undoubtedly faith is here helping to elevate art, to exalt it, without however modifying either its requirements or its subject-matter. From a non-Christian point of view, faith would be equivalent, in the process of artistic creation, to love, joy, or any other particularly inspiring emotion.

Even in expressing praise the dramatist must vindicate his complete liberty of inspiration. The faithful theologian will support him in this, he is mindful of the limits of his office. A church which presumed to dictate the main lines for Christian drama to its artists would fall at once into the heresy of Constantine. More than this, it would risk clipping the wings of the drama which it had annexed in this arbitrary manner.

There remains however one realm where the collaboration between artist and theologian must necessarily be a close one—that of *liturgical* drama. But the collaboration of these two is not enough. Even if the dramatist is a good theologian—which would seem eminently desirable—even if his essays meet with the enthusiastic approval of the good theologian, it is quite possible that the introduction of his art into the Church will prove a failure and only amount in the end to an abortive aesthetic attempt. There is another essential element which must be taken into account: the participation of the Christian faithful. Since the liturgy is divine service rendered by the community itself, it is essential that liturgical drama should express the worship of the community.

Lastly, it seems to me that theology can render a final and important service to the dramatist by *widening his horizon and his vision of the world*.

For three centuries the contemporary theatre has been generally cut off from the Church and suffered thereby a genuine impoverishment. It has become secularised, has reduced its dimensions to the mere confines of the human heart. It has become “psychological” theatre, sometimes even “boudoir” theatre. It is slowly being stifled in the manner of bourgeois drama.

Surely the theologian ought to help the dramatist recover the third dimension of his art? Whence comes the *tragic, universal* character of the great themes, stories and myths of the Old Testament, if not from this vertical dimension given to them by the dialogue between man and God. These stories have undergone no psychological mutilation; they are sober, stripped, reduced to the elementary gestures, the essential

words. By themselves they constitute an "action," a "drama" which has the whole created universe for its theatre.

May it not be true that the Bible itself contains the whole secret of a drama which might rediscover its original language by means of the miracle of faith?

The theologian cannot make the dramatist aware of this unless he has first opened himself to the disciplines of the theatre. And when the dramatist, on his side, has realised the genuine help which he can expect from theology, a profitable dialogue will begin. The profits will benefit both the drama and the Church.

Théâtre et Théologie

[Summary]

Pendant des siècles, l'artiste et le théologien ont vécu dans une méconnaissance réciproque, laquelle a abouti dans une séparation pleine de dangers et pour le théâtre. On constate avec satisfaction que maintenant un dialogue nouveau commence entr' eux.

Les réserves faites par la théologie traditionnelle à l'égard du théâtre ont parfois *négatives* (objections puritaines), parfois *positives* (concernant la tentation démiurgique de l'artiste, la tentation de faire du théâtre une religion, la tentation à utiliser la scène comme Chaire, le théâtre comme moyen efficace de predication). Les réserves négatives doivent être définitivement abandonnées, mais les réserves positives sont une aide précieuse que le dramaturge chrétien aurait tort de négliger. Plus qu'aucun autre l'artiste chrétien cherchant à communiquer sa foi sera menacé par cette troisième tentation, que l'art n'admet pas : la simplification d'une propagande si désintéressée soit-elle. Mais la vocation du dramaturge chrétien est ailleurs que dans la prédication.

En effet, le premier service que la théologie est en droit d'attendre d'un dramaturge ou d'un artiste chrétien est celui de la louange. Il n'y a rien de plus gratuit, de plus désintéressé, qu'un acte de louange.

C'est la foi qui donne un sens à la vie et aussi à l'art de l'artiste chrétien; or, la foi ne se réduit pas à une simple croyance dans de telles et telles propositions, mais l'artiste chrétien est celui qui reconnaît consciemment l'autorité et la présence du Christ dans toute sa vie et qui est prêt à le glorifier par son art. Mais dans l'expression même de sa louange le dramaturge doit revendiquer sa pleine liberté d'inspiration. Une Eglise qui prétendrait dicter à ses artistes les grandes lignes d'un théâtre chrétien tomberait aussitôt dans l'hérésie constantinienne.

Il reste cependant le domaine du théâtre liturgique où la collaboration est nécessairement étroite entre l'artiste et le théologien. Mais cette collaboration est insuffisante, sans l'adhésion du peuple chrétien. La liturgie étant le service divin rendu par la communauté elle-même, il est indispensable que le drame liturgique exprime le culte de cette communauté.

Enfin, il semble que la théologie peut rendre un éminent service au dramaturge en élargissant son horizon et sa vision du monde. Depuis trois siècles le théâtre souffre l'appauvrissement de la sécularisation, il a réduit ses dimensions aux seules parois du coeur humain. Le théologien doit aider le dramaturge à retrouver la troisième dimension de son art. Le caractère tragique et universel des grands récits de l'Ancien Testament vient de cette dimension verticale que leur donne le dialogue de l'homme et de Dieu; en plus ils sont sobres, dépouillés, n'ayant subi aucune mutilation psychologique. La Bible elle-même contient le secret d'un théâtre qui retrouverait, par le miracle de la foi, son langage originel.

Le théologien ne peut rendre conscient le dramaturge de ce secret, qu'il s'est, au préalable, ouvert aux disciplines du théâtre. Et quand le dramaturge aura, de son côté, reconnu le vrai service qu'il peut attendre de la théologie, un dialogue fructueux s'amorcera.

Ronald Grant

It is not an accident that two of the personalities who have contributed most to the stability of the Religious Drama Society have been soldiers. Ronald Grant would have been the last to think himself worthy of comparison with Sir Francis Younghusband, the Society's founder, but he gave it for many years the same quiet, disciplined yet inspired wisdom which characterised that great man. Whatever the storms through which the Society passed, he was always trusted and never failed to respond to the trust.

He came into the Society in its early years, and despite his modesty soon found himself in office as Vice-Chairman. It is typical of him that he never became Chairman, conspiring to pass himself over in favour of those whom he thought would be more useful at the top. Especially in later years it was often a struggle for him to attend meetings, but he was always regular, and his word was always waited for. As a leading personality in Toc H, later as warden of a Farm Colony, he knew more than most of us about what the people we exist to serve were thinking and feeling. Christianity to him was right in the middle of life, and he wanted drama to show it in that position.

He acted for many years with the Mystical Players and in the Joyous Pageant of the Nativity; and he played Peter in the London production of Gordon Bottomley's *The Acts of Saint Peter* at St. Margaret's Westminster, in 1935. It was old-fashioned acting, perhaps, but the sincerity of the man shone through it. After the war he devoted some of his time to producing at Sevenoaks, where he lived, a religious drama group based on the solid foundations of study and prayer and fellowship which he had laid. He also took an intense interest in the building up of the New Pilgrim Players, of which he was one of the Directors, and gave them much help in the preparation of their work and by making contact of them through his wide circle of friends.

Ronald Grant loved life: good companionship, a good meal, the pleasures of the mind meant much to him. But he loved the Giver of life most of all, and none of us who knew him have any doubt that he is now at home.—E. MARTIN BROWNE.

I first met Colonel Grant in 1934 when Charles Claye asked me to take the part of the Young Shepherd in the Joyous Pageant of the Holy Nativity. Grant was the Old Shepherd, and we played opposite each other every year the Pageant was produced with the exception of one occasion when he had to be abroad. It was always a pleasure to act with him for he had great sincerity and great humanity. It was this latter quality, I believe, that made his performance so memorable, for the Old Shepherd was struggling humanity.

It is a long time since 1934 and it would be possible to write at length about his work in the Pageant. But I will confine myself to three memories of him.

When it was time for *Shepherds in the Field* I would frequently look for him. He was always to be found with the children. He had many "boy shepherds" to lead him to Bethlehem and each one of them adored him.

Before the Innocents scene in which we both spoke I always used to try and sit quietly in some secluded corner of the wings to meditate upon its meaning. He was invariably there too and we sat quietly together before going on.

Finally on the stage, despite the many performances we gave, he always moved me with his great sincerity when turning to the Innocents he cried: "And these be blest for first they were to share the bitter gladsome passion of our Lord."—GREVILLE POKE.

The Rockefeller Foundation

As announced just before the last issue went to Press, we have had notification of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation of New York.

The money is given for certain specified activities both in England and abroad, the activities including expansion of training work in Great Britain, and a second International Conference on Religious Drama to be held in 1960. It was by means of a previous grant that the Society was able to organise the first International Conference which was held at Oxford in July, 1956.

This grant is a five-year tapering one, as the Rockefeller Foundation hopes that during the five-year period increased support from the churches in this country will enable the Religious Drama Society to maintain and develop its services to these Churches.

Some misunderstanding was occasioned by the Press reports which stated that the money had been given to Pilgrim Players Ltd. This body was, for technical reasons, used by the Rockefeller Foundation as the Society's agent for payment.

“A Man Named Judas”

Extracts from Correspondence

From Father Nicholas Graham, The Warden, Hostel of the Resurrection
Springfield Mount, Leeds, 2.

30th March, 1957.

“Probably I have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, am being impertinent and a bore—but in the current issue of *Christian Drama* on p.21, *A Man named Judas* is reviewed.

“I don’t know the play at all, but if it is true that ‘the thought behind the play is that Judas was right, but he didn’t live long enough to prove himself so,’ then the play is *not* a Christian play and should not, surely be recognised or sponsored by R.D.S.?”

From The National Secretary to Father Nicholas Graham.

5th April, 1957.

“My own opinion is that it is our job to take notice of any production of plays purporting to be religious drama. If none of our staff can see and write up a play we have perforce to ask someone else. In this case the critique was written by a clergyman. The publication by us of a review of a play surely does not imply that it is ‘recognised or sponsored by R.D.S.’

“I will discuss your point with Mr. Martin Browne, who, as you know, produced the play in Scotland prior to the Devon Festival.”

From E. Martin Browne, Esq., 20 Lancaster Grove, N.W.3.

22nd May, 1957.

“Re *A Man named Judas*: I do not think the reviewer has interpreted the play correctly. Judas is not represented as *being* right, but as *thinking* he is right. He betrays Jesus in order to force Him to reveal His Godhead. In the end he comes to realise that that revelation has been made, not through power, but through sacrifice: in despair he commits suicide just too soon to hear the news of the Resurrection. This Judas appeals to a contemporary audience not because they sympathise with him, but because his motives are fully and consistently presented. The play is implicitly Christian in that it shows that extra dimension which the divinity of Jesus introduces into the story.”

Editor’s Note.

We should be glad to have any further views on this matter.

Venture in New York

by HENZIE RAE BURN and E. MARTIN BROWNE

In January, 1954, when we were in New York with *The Confidential Clerk*, the President of Union Theological Seminary, Dr. Van Dusen, invited us to give a talk on Religious Drama. This proved to be part of a deep-laid plan; we found among those present one of the Directors of the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation. Conversations had already been going on about a Program of Religious Drama, by which this Seminary would take the lead in introducing the subject into American curricula. A little later, we were asked whether it would be possible for us to conduct the first year of a three-year experiment to be financed by the Foundation: we could go only for the first Semester (i.e. the first half of the academic year) 1956-57, and this we did.

Union Seminary is a remarkable place. Originally a Presbyterian college, it has come to include a good proportion of students from all the chief Protestant denominations. The result is not a juxtaposition of independent elements, but a unity in diversity: for the Seminary is the American spearhead of the Oecumenical Movement. Its students come looking for a larger unity, to which their own heritage is to be added, not surrendered: and the pattern of its life, particularly its worship-life, is created corporately from week to week by staff and students together to offer that unity to the One God. Liturgical patterns of all denominations, from the past and the present alike, are studied with a view to developing a common liturgical practice that has meaning for all. The morning service at 8.30 a.m. is attended by almost the whole community: two others, conducted entirely by students in the smaller chapel at 5.25 and 10.30 p.m., are well supported.

The student body numbers about 600 in all. Of these, just over half are ordinands—the remainder are divided between Religious Education, theological and philosophical research (often in association with Columbia University across the road), and a large and excellent School of Sacred Music.

The academic standard is extremely high. All students are graduates, coming from all over the States, with many from abroad. The quality of the staff may be suggested by remarking that Reinhold Niebuhr, as Vice-President, is not a lonely giant though a deeply respected one. Theological, philosophical, aesthetic and political argument rages unceasingly: and it is a tribute to the quality of the fellowship and the strength of the worship that the atmosphere is a notably happy one. This, I think, is assisted by the presence of many women—a small minority among the student body, but brought up to considerable strength by "student wives." Many students marry before or during their time at Union, and in many cases it is by the wife's earnings that the man is enabled to get through his course. All the clerical and much of the domestic staff is composed of student wives. Children, though not encouraged, are quite numerous:

probably the busiest rooms in the College are the laundry (equipped with "super" washing and drying machines) and the playroom. There are no drones, male or female, at Union. The social life is vigorous, almost hectic at times, though there is no gloom to be banished by a party.

The first purposes of the Program in Religious Drama were to give the Seminary students, and those coming in from outside to take courses a knowledge of the nature and history of Religious Drama, of the material already created, and of the problems and techniques of play creation. But beyond this it was hoped that new standards could be set and that America could be inspired to create her own religious plays.

Our courses were two: a lecture course, lavishly illustrated with readings from plays of all periods, and a workshop where groups of students worked on production and on the creation of liturgical, historical and modern drama. All of these groups were experiments, mostly rather fumbling, and their value will have been mainly as pilot schemes for development under Robert Seaver, the Speech Professor at Union, who has become Director of the Program.

Added to the courses, however, was the task of implementing the promise that three productions would be presented during the Semester. This really involved the creation of a production organisation from scratch. Union has no proper stage, no stage staff, no wardrobe—and theological students are busy people. However, there was ample goodwill and energy. The planning was done on a realistic basis: to use the resources we had, to use all who wanted to act if even marginally competent, and to present a programme illustrating some of the possibilities of the medium. We avoided full-length plays so as to widen the variety and lessen the strain.

First came *Christ in the Concrete City*, a type of play new to the Americans, and very good for welding the actors into a team. We gave it both in the Social Hall and in the Chapel, to illustrate the difference between church and theatre presentation, and we took it to two out-of-town churches whose congregations discussed it with us afterwards. Some thought it too "guilt-ridden," but all appreciated the power and directness of the author's treatment of the Passion.

The feast of Christmas occurred in the latter half of the Semester, and this suggested two Nativity plays, rehearsed simultaneously. *The York Nativity* was given in the Chapel with medieval carols beautifully sung by the School of Sacred Music. This again was something new, and was visited by Brooks Atkinson, the dramatic critic of the "New York Times," who wrote:

"... It has grace and beauty. It is also profoundly moving. For there is nothing in art that quite equals the wondrous attitude of the unknown author of these simple plays toward the story of the Nativity, or of the verse written in the period of Chaucer when the English language was taking form . . .

"No one can duplicate to-day the physical or spiritual conditions under which these simple devotionals were originally played and viewed by the people. But Mr. Browne has recaptured in our terms the simplicity and adoration of the fables. All the action takes place in the chancel of the church. There is no scenery. The only props are a bed and manger. But the costumes, especially

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the blue robe for Mary, are chaste and lovely. And the limpid acting by students is poignant, especially in the nativity scene, which Mr. Browne has staged with notable taste and feeling.

"In comparison with the artisans and mechanics who originally acted these religious mysteries, we are fearfully educated and cultivated to-day. But these plays and this glorious music are our sources. They are pure and humbling, for they mean what they say."

This sensitive appreciation by the world's most powerful critic gave the Program a theatrical standing which should help it in the future.

Beginning of the Way was produced by the author, Henzie Raeburn, in the hall, and much appreciated for the way in which the familiar characters are seen as real human beings. For this, costumes were made by a friendly helper, as they had been for the York Play by student and faculty wives under a young designer.

After Christmas, we ended the Semester with a double bill by Charles Williams, *The House by the Stable* and *Grab and Grace*. This production appealed especially to the Seminary, successful by reason of its combination of gay and penetrating wit with poetry and knockabout. The fight between the two girls in *Grab and Grace*, coached by the College wrestling champion (an ordinand) "went over big." A discussion on the Program to date revealed a keen and critical interest in the possibilities of Christian Drama, and though it was sad to say farewell to our many friends, we left with confidence in the future of dramatic creation at Union and in Christian communities throughout the United States.

SUMMER SCHOOL, 1957

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Summer School

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How can drama serve Christianity in terms of the twentieth century?

This will be a most unusual holiday course, for John Crockett, one of the tutors, is writing a *modern Passion Play* for the occasion. This experiment should co-ordinate the activities of the whole School into an organic whole, while retaining within the framework the variety of interests that students require from a course of this kind.

The production and acting groups under a specially invited team of tutors will work on the different scenes of the play. Mr. Crockett will use a variety of styles, bearing in mind the purpose of each group; i.e. presentation in hall, experiments in street plays, youth work, design, music, etc. There will be some crowd sessions when the whole School will take part, and the play will be presented in rehearsal form at the end of the course. Carrying on the idea of a research group which proved so popular last year, a group will study drama under Mr. Raymond Chapman of the University of London.

Other tutors are David Giles, tutor R.A.D.A.; John Rule, tutor Central School of Speech and Drama; David Cutforth, director of music, Maidstone Grammar School; Christine Pirie, designer, and Carina Robins, Producer and Travelling Adviser to R.D.S. We will have with us for a few days Mrs. Baxter and also Mr. and Mrs. E. Martin Browne who recently gave a course on Religious Drama at the Union Theological Seminary of New York.

The setting of Keele College in its magnificent park, and the comfort of the modern accommodation it offers, will be an attraction for holiday-makers. Excursions are being arranged to places of interest.

If you have not yet sent for an application form I hope you will do so without delay, and not only come yourself, but help to publicise this course far and wide.

CARINA ROBINS,

Organiser.

Notes from the Back Pew

Talking Point

This comment was addressed by Dr. C. S. Lewis to poets, but it applies even more strikingly to dramatists:

"Can you go beyond the pageant of your bleeding heart and the general state of the world and present a *situation*?"

Bernard Shaw complained of Shakespeare that ". . . a novice can read his plays from one end to the other without learning that the world is finally governed by forces expressing themselves in religions and law

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which make epochs rather than by vulgarly ambitious individuals who make rows." But Shakespeare has not done so badly, this last three hundred years or so, and by no means merely as an entertainer.

Surely drama is about people with ideas, not about ideas?

Plus Ça Change . . .

A Summer School student was once heard to remark plaintively, "Religious Drama makes me terribly *hungry*." The Tudor performers of the Chester Cycle knew all about that, as witness their accounts in 1561:

Paid for the first rehearse	..	..	..	6d.
Drink in Barber's after the rehearse	..	..	..	18d.
For beef against the general rehearse	..	..	..	6s. 8d.
Three old cheeses	..	..	..	4s. 0d.

And isn't there something rather familiar about this entry, in 1574:

Spent on Thomas Marler to get him to play..	2d.
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Plus C'est La Meme Chose

In Elizabethan drama, the actors admonish the prompter—

"I pray you hold the book well, [that] we be not non plus in the latter end of the play,"

—complain of the author—

"The Poet . . . has kicked me three or four times about the Tiring House, for but offering to put in, with my experience,"

—and give the designer headaches like this:

"John Pansser comes in, wonderously clad; not clownishly, but venerably and honourably, yet so that there is something to laugh at."

After that kind of thing, it was brutal to tell him, "But you will ne'er have any wardrobe wit while you live!"

CAPELLA.

As an Australian sees it!

HAROLD BENNETT

*Co-Founder-Director of the Australian Christian Theatre Guild—
currently at large in Britain.*

When are we going to stop messing around with Religious Drama?

A non-religious national who has made considerable headway in show business in the U.K., recently set me thinking furiously after he had, over coffee, roundly condemned all non-professional theatre and theatricals. "The amateur theatre! Humph! Absolutely unproductive. It's crammed with people trying to satisfy huge egos . . . bods who haven't the guts to swap cushy nine to five jobs for the less steady income

of the theatre for its own sake. Very few amateurs ever become professionals. For the most part, professionals actually start in the business—graduating through Drama School, then accepting gladly the token probationary remuneration paid to ‘students’ by provincial companies. The theatre as a hobby! It’s a contradiction in terms, and what more. . . .”

He raved on for more minutes, but his point had been made . . . indeed perhaps he had only crystallised what I had experienced during ten previous weeks in Rep., where identification and devotion were virtually absolute—where temperament would get nowhere—where no one was late for “the half” or rehearsal call—where such phrases as “my last ‘bus” goes at . . .” were never heard.

When are we going to stop messing around with Religious Drama?

After nearly a year in the Mother Country of the Commonwealth—touristing, summer-schooling, play-going, writing, A.S.M.-ing, acting and producing, the writer puts the question squarely to the Christian consciences of the two countries with which he is most familiar—Great Britain and (in its own way) Great Australia.

In seven years, my own Australian (amateur) group has come a long way. There is loyalty—from members who were seven years younger when they first joined—and from members who have linked up since I have been away. There is a keen consciousness of calling—of devotion—it is a Christian group in no glib sense, and a group in which real talent and artistic progress are undeniably evident.

But occasional temperament is still a problem; there is sometimes unreliability . . . other times . . . buses . . . and, if only because the bulk of members have unrelated full-time jobs and consequent divided minds and energies, we are messing about with religious drama.

Let’s face it. On its highest plane, Drama, like Christianity, is a complete and all-embracing business; in a very real sense, part-devotion is no devotion at all. Undoubtedly there are sincere amateur Christian drama fans—but they are at best only partly trained, and sincerity is no substitute for experience and artistic technique.

As there are at present, no professional Christian acting groups in Britain or Australia, I am, of course, haranguing and condemning both countries, and all keen Christian dramatists in all sections of the Christian church.

Oh for the day when your New Pilgrim Players come out of retirement! and for the day when the A.C.T.G. commence functioning at least, partially professionally; we are planning to that end.

In some respects, Australia offers a proportionately larger scope for Christian dramatic fitness than the U.K. . . . although, of course, with our vast distances, national stage touring does not seem possible on an equitable scale. In Sydney, for example, the A.C.T.G. now has its own public “Guild Theatre” and club rooms, within the newly modernised Community Centre of St. Barnabas Broadway. The New South Wales

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council of Churches hold the licence and direct part of the policy of radio Station 2CH—the whole of Sunday being devoted to religious broadcasting, with regular programmes and spots throughout the week. The Christian Broadcasting Association makes and distributes religious programmes for a large proportion of the 108 Australian commercial radio stations and beyond . . . all stations being obliged to make available time for religious broadcasting on a weekly basis. There is now the Christian T.V. Association. The Anglican Church holds shares in and sits on the board of TCN, one of the two Sydney commercial T.V. channels. National (Australian Broadcasting Commission) radio and television, by charter, allocates time for religious broadcasting. In most of these non-stage media, A.C.T.G. has participated and indeed, provides a ready source of trained talent, which is very often called upon. Certain members actually work within the commercial organisations and at times have been able to influence programming, etc.

The Australian Christian Theatre Guild was born in Sydney, following the return of an Anglican minister from Britain, where he had attended one of the early post-war R.D.S. summer schools. On invitation, he conducted a short course of drama for the Sydney Diocesan Youth Department—in which an already existing Anglican Drama Group took prominent part. Subsequently, the denominational group folded up, and two of its members (including the writer) saw the vision of a group wholly dedicated to drama of a Christian character—evangelical in its outlook—interdenominational in its scope and membership. So it is that we have no Anglican Founders, a Congregational Patron, a Baptist Chaplain, a Church of Christ President (for the current year) and a Liaison Officer from each of the various denominations. This latter aspect is, we feel, its strength, and the joy of playing and praying together, is something we would never wish to relinquish. A.C.T.G. has had several “homes” before moving to Broadway, and in the main, stage activities were almost entirely “toured.” Now we have a modern theatre for public performances and club rooms of our own.

We still tour of course—that being felt to be an essential part of the ministry of Christian Drama. There is always a houseparty each year—generally over a long week-end by the seaside or in the Blue Mountains; we speak at Fellowship Teas, conduct church services, feature a verse-speaking choir, and always seem able to lay on someone at the shortest notice, to answer an outside S.O.S. for make-up assistance, scriptwriting, training, broadcasting, lighting and so on. We were glad to co-operate in “Mission to the Nation”—sponsored by the Methodist Church of Australia, which took us to many unexpected places, including Sydney showground, various trade union halls and as far afield as Canberra, the National Capital.

We have built up a fairly substantial wardrobe, library and assortment of props, and these are sometimes lent and hired to outside bodies. There is A.C.T.G. representation on the council of the British Drama League, and we usually enter the B.D.L. Annual Festival of Drama, at

which we have been severally successful. As far as has been possible courses of training have been introduced into the framework of the Guild but many members have supplemented this training, by taking private tuition at their own expense.

Undoubtedly the cream of plays in our possession has come from those recommended in the R.D.S. Library Catalogue; the Australian market yields very little in the way of mature Christian plays.

Gradually, A.C.T.G. is becoming known both within and without the Christian Church—to some extent because of the Press Critics, whom we are thankful so say, are largely competent, severe and fair.

It is our policy to meet and mix with non-Christian theatricals, and times certain members are given leave to appear in productions of secular groups; much goodwill has resulted. Indeed, there have been occasions when group members have actually produced for other groups; all this of course, without compromising in any way the aims, ideals and conduct of the Guild as a specifically Christian body.

In seven years of functioning, A.C.T.G. has staged numerous plays, some of the most successful being *Boy with a Cart*, *Man is Omega*, *Man of Magdala*, *Figure on the Cross*, *Mother of all Living*, *Thor with Angels*, *The Apple Tree*, *The Light in Darkness* and of late, *Christ in the Concrete City*—still touring after twelve months of playing.

The future? A professional company within the Guild perhaps—studio or academy—children's productions—the production of religious films—summer schools—street drama—regular television programmes. These are some of our aims which we are working to make realities.

But up to the moment—**we are still messing around with Religious Drama—aren't WE?**

This Way to the Jail . . .

RICHARD TYDEMAN

(Reprinted by kind permission of the author and of the editor
"Amateur Stage.")

The Curate of a neighbouring parish came to see me the other night. He is such a nice chap, good, kind and honest—I would willingly trust him with the contents of my purse.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said, "I've come to return the copy of that play you lent me."

Well, that just shows you how honest he is. Naturally when I lend a play to anyone, I kiss it goodbye. But here was a play of mine returning to the fold—and in good condition, too. Surely this was an honest man.

"We decided to do the play," he went on. "Good," said I, "have you taken a note of the publisher's address for the copies?" "That won't be necessary," he replied with a smile, "you see, one of our members is an expert on the typewriter, so she has made us half-a-dozen copies from ours."

"Has she indeed?"

"We haven't much money to spare, so we have to economise whenever we can. Anyway, we're most grateful to you for lending us your copy."

"And when are you proposing to put the play on?" I asked. "Oh, not all the autumn. At present we are frantically busy with" and here he mentioned the title of a current West-End success. "Really?" I said in surprise, "but surely it's still on in London?" "I know. Apparently it isn't 'released'—whatever that means—but we got hold of a reading edition to go on with."

"You're being a bit ambitious, aren't you?"

"Oh, we're not going to attempt the whole play. Just part of the second act. Have you seen it, by the way?" I nodded.

"Well, you remember the tea-party scene, which ends with Mary and Septimus realising that they have met before; when I saw the show in London last month, I thought at once what a lovely one-act play that it would make."

I gazed at him in horrified admiration as he went on:

"We had to make a few alterations of course."

"Of course," I echoed.

"We had to cut out the references to Mary's uncle, because the audience wouldn't know about him; and we've turned the butler into a maid because we haven't enough men in our little group."

My brain reeled as he gaily babbled along:

"You ought to come and see it if you can. I know how busy you are, but we are running three nights at the end of this week. We're not terribly good, but it should be an interesting programme: there's this excerpt first; then *Awake My Soul*, a religious drama; and we are finishing with an original play written by one of our members."

"An original play?"

"Yes, it's not bad at all. The only trouble is that the author keeps entering speeches at every rehearsal, and he hasn't decided on a title yet."

"You'd better keep me a ticket," I found myself saying. "We're not selling tickets; just a collection at the door. It saves printing, you see, and it also means we needn't pay royalties. Every little helps."

"And one of the plays is actually religious," I murmured.

"Yes, it's pretty strong stuff, too. But fortunately our vicar is broad-minded; he says we can put it on in church later on—so long as we don't let the Bishop know. He might not approve of the language! Well, thank you again, and now I must be off. Do come along if you can, on Thursday, Friday or Saturday. It's in a good cause, too; all the profits go for the Prisoners' After-Care Association."

"Very appropriate," I put in with a snort, "you may soon be needing their help yourself if you go on at this rate."

He gazed at me in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Do you realise," I asked, "that of the things you have done or are shortly going to do, at least seven are completely illegal?"

"Which are they?" he gasped.

I told him, and his face betrayed his feelings of guilt and horror.

Unfortunately there are still many people who seem just as ignorant of the law as my curate friend, and many others who ought to know better and seem to have no sense of guilt at all.

Can you find the seven illegalities? If not, perhaps your society, too, is unwittingly in the shadow of the jail! *Answers inside back cover.*

ADDITIONS TO THE LIBRARY

PLAYS

The Breaking Day. Willard Lancaster. (Independent Press, 3/6.) H. 3 acts, 10m., 5w., soldiers.

This prose play about St. Alban, added to the typescript library in 1955, now appeared in print. (Fee: apply publishers.)

A Christmas Parable. H. H. S. Jackson. (Epworth Press, 1/-.) H. 3 acts, 13m., 8w., 7 children (doubling poss.).

A simple dramatisation of *A Christmas Carol* for young people. (Fee: 2/-.)

Every Knee shall Bow. R. A. Wall. (Religious Education Press, 6d.) H. 2 scenes, 12 children, 1 w., 15 tableau char. (Children's Christmas play.) (No fee.)

Flame in the Forest. Cyril J. Davey. (Epworth Press, 1/6.) H. 1 act (30 minutes), 3m., 2w.

Originally produced on television in May, 1956.

Janet, a missionary's wife, is left alone in her bungalow in Africa, during a rising (time and district unspecified). Two white people and an African join her. Kwama, the African, is faced with the terrible alternatives: to renounce his Christian faith, or to sacrifice, not himself, but his wife and children. Janet herself is confronted with the terrorist leader, Kwama's brother, who has killed her husband and is mortally hurt himself. What should she do with him?

This short play presents important issues squarely, though the restrictions of the one-act form cramp its full development. (Fee: 10/6, 7/6.)

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The Gift. R. F. E. Pelham. (Religious Education Press, 8d.) H. 3 scenes. 1m., 3w., 3b., 3g., carol singers, tableau of 8 char.

A simple Christmas-time morality for children, set in a small German town. No fee.)

The Gold is a Way. Charles Green. (Typescript.) Continuous action. XH. 4-20 char. (variable).

"Through the rocky reef of time

There runs . . . A vein of rarest gold . . .

The gold is the tried gold of love."

A new dramatisation of the Stations of the Cross, in unpretentious free verse and mime, for a Chorus of variable size.

Admirers of Ghéon's *Way of the Cross* will find this independent approach to the same theme interesting and worth experiment. (Fee: apply author, c/o D.S.)

Great Christian Plays. ed. by Theodore M. Switz and Robert A. Johnston. (Seabury Press, \$7.50.)

This volume is divided into two main sections:

(a) Acting versions of five medieval texts, made by American scholars; comprising the Brome **Abraham and Isaac**, the York **Resurrection**, the Digby **Conversion of St. Paul**, **Totentanz** (the **Dance of Death**, a morality), and **Everyman**.

Though not without interest, it is doubtful whether these will supersede the versions already available.

(b) Selected choral readings:

(i) A group of dramatised readings on the lives of the Apostles Thomas, John, James and Andrew. They might be suggested for Patronal Festivals of churches with these dedications.

(ii) **The Royal Pathway.** Readings for a verse choir from the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis.

(iii) **The Suffering of St. Mary.** A dramatic poem for Passiontide, by Charles Péguy, trans. by Julian Green and arranged for three readers.

(iv) **Christ our Saviour.** Readings from St. John's Gospel, arr. by F. A. Schilling, in which readers, minister and congregation take part. Special music by Thomas Matthews is included in the volume.

(Fees: (a) for details apply R.D.S. library.

(b) No fee.)

The Masque of Everyman. Peter Fison. (Mowbray, 5/-.) H. Continuous action. 7m., 3., reporters, chorus. Modern morality play in verse. (Fee: apply publishers.)

Activity Play for Voices. Michael Deakin. (Typescript.) HX. Continuous. 15 voices.

A verse experiment written for a school.

The Road to Damascus. Margaret Wood. (French, 1/6.) H. 1 act. 7m., 1b., 1w. A crisply written study of St. Paul on the day of the stoning of Stephen. He is seen beset with inner conflicts that he refuses to acknowledge, "grilling" a group of Christians, and contending with Stephen himself. After Stephen's death, Paul extorts the address of the Christian centre in Damascus from a prisoner, and prepares to set out on his momentous journey.

A good one-act play, especially suitable for Festivals. (Fee: £1/1/-.)

The Saxon Saint. Robert Kemp. (St. Giles Press, 4/6.) H. 7 scenes. 9m., 6w., 1 supers.

A pageant play about the life of St. Margaret of Scotland, written for performance in the nave of Dunfermline Abbey, during the Edinburgh Festival of 1950. (Fee: apply publishers.)

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The Sole Survivors. F. H. Wiseman. (Epworth Press, 4/6.) H. 3 acts. 11

A well-written thriller for a cast of boys, recommended especially to Boy Clubs, Scouts, etc.

The time is "the future." Atomic experiments have got out of hand. Cha reactions engulf Europe and America in destruction. By chance, one fragme of England is left, and on it a group of boys of different backgrounds and race (including two Teddy Boys with a gun). They must learn how to keep alive, and how to live together.

The situation is worked out with humour and excitement, and (unfortunately) only too much probability. (Fee: 10/6, 5/-.)

What a Collection! A. A. Baker. (Highway Press, 1/-.) H. 1 act. 7 children

A children's fantasy on a missionary theme. Six coins—and one button—together in the offertory plate. (Fee: 5/-, apply R.D.S.)

REFERENCE LIBRARY

Amateur Drama on a Small Income. Heather Conway. (Hutchinson, 2/6.)

A practical handbook to amateur drama, concisely and helpfully written, packed with information for producers and stage-managers.

Approach to the Theatre. Frances Mackenzie. (French, 5/-.)

A valuable and readable book by the Principal of the Training Department of the British Drama League. She writes from many years' experience, on the general theme of "How do you make the play *live*?" Her searching analysis of the strength and weakness of amateur work, and the dry humour that enlivens the pages, make this book thoroughly recommendable to all producers in search of inspiration and guidance.

We are grateful to Miss Mackenzie for her gift to the library of a copy of this book.

Christianity and the Arts. W. M. Merchant. (The Church in Wales, Adult Council.)

Notes for a course of eight lectures dealing with both the visual and the auditory arts, prepared on behalf of the Provincial Council for Education for use with Adult Groups in parishes in the Church in Wales.

Drama in Schools. E. J. Burton. (Herbert Jenkins, 5/-.)

Lighting the Amateur Stage. M. G. Say. (Albyn Press, 5/-.) Revised edition

Erratum.—No fee was recorded for **Christmas with St. Francis**, by Fred Collins, in our last issue. In fact, the play carries a performing fee of 7/6 each performance.

SPECIAL NOTES

Seat of Judgement. Cyril J. Davey. (Epworth Press, 2/-.) H. 1 act. 9/10 6/7w.

A "tough" in a pub is suddenly faced with the memory of his past crime. In that moment, time stands still, and he is in the eternal Place of Judgement, confronted by his long-suppressed conscience. A jury of oppressively respectable and refined people condemn him, for they have their own secret sins, and condemn so obviously evil a man as Joe proves to be salves their own pride.

In the searching Light of God's approach they collapse, and Joe is left all alone in terror to face God. What he finds is not the Judge, but the Saviour Who died for him and offers him forgiveness.

The play attempts to cover a great deal of ground in one act. The impact of the final scene must inevitably be weakened by the attention lavished on the scenes earlier, and the whole action seems overweighted by the profundity of the themes.

Its message is put over with what is known as "crude evangelism" and "vulgar emotionalism"—in some settings, certainly, it might prove embarrassing rather than moving. In the right circumstances, however, I feel that its crudity is

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directness would be virtues, and that it might be extremely powerful. Only production can test this, of course, and it is hoped that some groups will try it out.—B.J. (Fee. 10/6.)

The Trial. John Ferguson. (Epworth Press, 1/6.) H. 1 act (40 mins.). 4m., 4w. A judge has died, and comes to the courts of Heaven. He is invited to preside at the trial of a woman, whom he inexorably condemns for breaking all Ten commandments.

When he learns, with indignation, that "the President of the Court shall undergo in person any treatment he decrees," he appeals to God for a fair judgement on himself.

Three witnesses for his own prosecution are called: a woman he met in Sicily; an Indian who died of starvation because of the curtailment of the Colombo Plan; and a Japanese who died as a result of atom tests in the Pacific. He is driven to admit himself morally guilty of adultery, theft and murder, if not in act. He throws away his robes, and submits as a sinner.

The court is reminded of its own decree—and in the blaze of light above the altar a Cross is seen.

The play is original and extremely challenging. It can be recommended as much to enterprising groups. It has been felt, however, that the author's ruthless simplification, and the compression of one-act dramatic form, override questions one would ask—how far, and in what sense, we as individuals are guilty of corporate acts, for instance. It seems possible, also, that the play might produce the attitude, "I thank God that I am not as this Pharisee," rather than the soul-searching intended.—B.J. (Fee: 2/6.)

The Art of the Dramatist. J. B. Priestley. (Heinemann, 10/6.)

The lecture here printed was given by the author at the Old Vic Theatre on 10th September, 1956. On the following night at the Arts Council he held a seminar to discuss several points raised, and these form the substance of twelve appendices which occupy two-thirds of a delightfully produced volume.

As a well-versed practitioner of the dramatist's art, Mr. Priestley writes with considerable authority. Perhaps the most interesting idea propounded is that all dramatic experience can be achieved only by a realised schizophrenia with the mind of the dramatist, writing on two levels, in two worlds both real and theatrical; of the actor, balancing his own personality with that of the character he portrays; and of each member of the audience, personally involved in the drama (disciples of Herr Brecht please note) yet never so deeply as to forget his presence in a theatre.

Mr. Priestley's brief onslaught upon Mr. Walter Kerr and his book "How Not to Write a Play" is especially exciting, and shows what a splendid critic he would himself have made. The whole volume indeed adds to the impression, for the author's title belies his range, and he writes with equal interest about the arts of writing a play, acting in it, or assisting from the auditorium.—JOHN HESTER.

**The LIBRARY will be closed for the annual Stocktaking from
AUGUST 5th-9th.**

**Please try to return all books before the 5th, so that this check
may be as complete as possible.**

FAR AND WIDE

Reports and Reviews of Christian Drama Activities in Great Britain and Overseas

Alfreton, Derby

On Palm Sunday, some of the faithful communicants of St. Martin's Church, Alfreton, performed **Christ Crucified** by Margaret Cropper.

This play was chosen after much care, because of its deeply moving sincerity, but there was always the fear that the congregation of an industrial town—while appreciating the beauty and teaching of the human scenes—might be bewildered by the long scenes acted by the five Angels of the play. Great care was taken, therefore, that the Angels should be dressed so that they dominated the play. The three Angels of the Prophetic Vision wore gold; the First Angel (standing centre) having a panel of crimson to "break the line" and link her with the Angel of the Mind of Our Lord, who wore crimson with a gold cloak reaching to his feet, while the Angel of the Passion wore deep purple. They were raised high behind the screen, with a special spotlight illuminating them, and so the effect of "other-worldliness" was achieved.

On the main stage the human characters acted with sincerity, and each scene was linked with those of the Angels by an unseen choir singing one verse each time of "O Sacred Head," thus keeping the continuity of the play unbroken.

The congregation was very still while the play was performed, and there can be no doubt that its message was understood and deeply appreciated by those who watched and all who took part.—R.N.C.

* * *

Bangalore, South India.

Extracts from a letter:

"After successfully dealing with many disappointments and problems, the second School of Christian Drama finally took place in Bangalore, and 27 students came. They were from five language groups, Marathi, Hindi, Telegu, Tamil and English. They were mostly teachers, with a sprinkling of

clergy and women church workers and adult literacy workers. All except one had both written and produced plays in their schools or villages, and were considered by their churches experienced people in Drama. They were picked, sent and financed by the church or mission."

The course included talks on drama in general, playwriting, and the practical problems of staging plays in the villages of India, and on the possibilities of radio drama. Practical playwriting was also studied—the students worked on Parables, and acted out their ideas in the group work sessions.

"We need more such schools, it is plain. More need to be taught. Those who had been taught were thirsty for more. But there was one criticism that shrieked at us. Almost all the lecturers are Western. But where are the Indians able to take their places? We only knew of two—Sundar Rao who had not been able to come, and the other was studying in America. And so the suggestion was made to try to organise an intensive three week course to train a few leaders from each language area. Then they should return to conduct Drama Schools in their own area in the vernacular."

Our correspondent suggests "that we invite out from England and America professionals who are both ready to learn and adapt themselves to the Indian situation, and who are Christians and could enter into the spirit and aims of the movement. We do not think it will be difficult to find people to come, as this is such an exciting and worthwhile task. . . ."

"We are going to send out a Bulletin twice a year, give advice by correspondence, and recommend books to study, etc. And who is going to do all this? Well, the National Christian Council has set up a Commission, and it is through that we will work. A great adventure has begun, and we look to you for help and support in prayer

advice and any other way you can manage. 'Who is sufficient for these things?' But what a tremendous privilege to share in this movement to create a Christian Drama for this drama-loving sub-continent of India."

* * *

Berwick-upon-Tweed

For our first attempt at Christian Drama we chose **This Rock** by Alan Poole, which we presented on Palm Sunday evening. This Border town has been a fishing port for centuries, and so we put the Apostles into fishermen's jerseys, while the women wore long, dark skirts and shawls. We were a little nervous of what our audience would say of this "modern dress"; but so far nobody has made any comment. Certainly, the men were able to act and move far more naturally than in "Biblical" costumes.

People who saw the production have described it as "very moving," and we feel that this was not so much due to our acting abilities as to the Grace of God, and the author's dramatic meditation on the Passion. After several weeks of rehearsal and one performance, every member of the cast had been led to a deeper understanding of that first Good Friday, and we hope that our audience was able to share a little of that understanding. Looking back on our first experience of presenting religious drama we suggest to those who are still wavering, that what matters is not so much talent or technique, but "A good play, and a good pray." We never knew before that a lot God can do with such unromancing actors, if they are dedicated to Him.

* * *

Solely Trinity, Brompton

The Way of the Cross—April, 1957.

There are, in the usual way, two sorts of passion play. There are those which are "anxiously contemporary" down to the very slang used by the characters. This means that within two years of writing they are out of date, and seldom come nearer to life than a kind of religious comic strip.

Then there is the "ha, sayest thou, Simon" school—the cotton-wool haired and dressing-gowned apostle sort.

Both are unworthy alike of their theme and of their action. Yet, since drama is extremely potent in arousing emotion, drama in religion there must be. But what sort of drama?

This production of Henri Ghéon's **The Way of the Cross** is at least one answer. By stylising the costumes and movements of the cast, by leaving the actual figure of our Lord to be indicated by their attitude and never in physical presence, by placing the story directly against the background of the sanctuary, without artificial set, by limiting the spoken word to command and interjection, the play is lifted from the plane of representation to that of experience. Within each person's own conscience it builds up its steady and unhurried crescendo, helped immensely by the really worshipful concentration of every player, as this links with the concentration of the audience. This is Drama, as the Greeks knew it—"action" shared alike by those within and without the play.

Could it be bettered? Speaking personally, I found the earlier episodes a trifle drawn out and monotonous in their expression—a fault rather of the play than of the production. There is in the minds of some of us a slight tension over the allying of the actual Gospel story with such quite hypothetical episodes as that of Veronica. In addition, the author's own device, that of letting the actors express in this scene kindness to the victim, in that one contempt—in order to remind us of our own varying degree of loyalty or treachery to our faith—is spiritually sound but dramatically confusing.

I should, myself, have valued a little more "audience participation"—perhaps by singing some of the passion hymns—in order that one's emotional concentration would be occasionally relaxed. But these are small points within a most memorable and moving production. For actors equally with audience, it must be one of the great acts of worship of Passiontide.—A.S.H.

* * *

Christchurch, Chelsea

The Christmas Story in Mime

This performance, directed by Miss Athene Seyler, was mimed and sung by members of the choir with two readers

speaking words from the Bible when the action was not accompanied by music.

By kind permission of Mr. Martin Browne the Mime had been extended to include a looking forward to the events of Easter. Through the eyes of three women watching the events of the Passion and of the Resurrection we were led from the adoration of the Holy Babe to the realisation of His ultimate sacrifice for our redemption.

The presentation was very beautiful, the players miming their parts with strength and grace and the excellent singing carrying the congregation into the Angelic Sphere from whence much of the music emanated. Beauty of line and colour in the costumes and delicacy of lighting enhanced the element of devotion, and one moment stood out when a young angel took the "unseen" Child in her arms and presented Him to the people, including all the congregation in a direct act of acceptance and worship. Later to witness the events of the Passion was to remind us, amid the Christmas joy, that the cross is always there to be borne, and presented a challenge and an inspiration to be taken away by those who were there to see the performance.—U.N.

Clapham

Great praise is due to the Rector and people of Holy Trinity, Clapham for deciding to put on **Christ in the Concrete City** in their church during Passion Week.

Greater praise is due to Carina Robins, as their producer, for taking the raw material of some seven dramatically untrained and inexperienced members of the congregation, and forming them into a team capable of tackling such a play.

Greatest praise of all is due to that team and Miss Robins together for creating between them by prayer, love and sheer slogging hard work (and perhaps nobody but they themselves can know how much of each went into it) an acting unit that was able to put over this exacting play in such an inspiring and moving manner.

All worth-while plays make demands on audience and on actors alike, but

this one in particular. It is written after the manner of Henri Ghéon's **The Way of the Cross** and is dressed in modern dress. With no change of costume therefore to help them, the actors have to portray sometimes Pilate or Caiaphas or the Disciples, or the Women of Jerusalem and sometimes modern folk who may or may not be their present-day equivalents. Added to this difficulty they have to make the audience realise the fact that in many scenes in the play **Our Lord** is actually meant to be present on the stage, but as He is of course not personified He can only be seen by the audience through the eyes and actions of the players.

The little group at Clapham overcame both these difficulties by sheer sincerity supremely well—once or twice indeed in a way that even professional actors would have envied.

After the performance I was asked by one of the cast "could you 'see' **Our Lord**?" Especially in the mocking scene and in the Garden of Gethsemane we certainly could, but what was some of us more surprising and considerably less pleasant was that we all "saw" ourselves.—B.P.

St. Philip's Church, Earls Court Miracle at Midnight

To exchange lines from one character to another in a play is difficult, add this a change in the nature of the characters themselves, i.e. "Christmas Waits" into "Angels"—speaking a large proportion of a "Herd's" lines and the thing becomes fraught with danger.

In the presentation of this play at St. Philip's Church the delicate balanced argument, difficult enough to convey when played as written, was largely lost. Lines which would be valid when spoken by a "Herd" became confused and obscure when spoken by an Angel, who must by necessity think and speak differently from those on the human plane.

Much thought and care had been given to the production—which was designed for proscenium presentation and therefore did not fully use the potentialities of the church—and there was much beauty of visual conception, colouring and grouping. The costumes were excellent in design and execution.

with the Angels in long cloaks lined with contrasting colours and the "Snowman" in a most convincing "Snow garment." The lighting was used with imagination to enhance the usual and emotional atmosphere of the play.

Individual performances were very good and there is much talent in this group. They should go on working together with the object of achieving a more solid unity of purpose—the fact that some carols were still not known to members of the angelic choir was unfortunately all too apparent to the congregation and destroyed that belief" which is a necessary component of dramatic representation.

This group has much to offer but could benefit from an increased sense of dedication.—U.N.

* * *

Godalming, Surrey

A new play about St. Paul called **Down to the Plain**, by Michael Allen, was given its first production by the Deanery Players, Godalming, during April. The author was founder of the company, and he has produced their Easter play in past years.

The play deals with St. Paul's story from his arrival in Jerusalem "breathing out fire and slaughter" for the slaying of Stephen, to the moment ten years later when he sets out with Barnabas as his first mission. The first and second acts are mainly concerned with his conversion, its causes and effects. The third act introduces a new question: should Paul stay in Tarsus on the heights" of private mystical experience? or go "down to the plain" to street corner evangelism and church organisation? Of course, we know the right answer in this case—but that where ever was a problem comes as a surprise, and raises interest at a point where it is always liable to fail, and produce "third act anticlimax."

The construction is firm, and there are some exciting climaxes, making full use of suspense. The dialogue is forceful and cogent, the product of much careful thought and study. However, its very cogency is curiously un-dramatic, and suggests the lecture room rather than the theatre. Over and over again, one had the feeling that a series

of talks on St. Paul had been transferred from the third to the first person. The characters explained rather than revealed themselves; their eloquence was more forensic than emotional. In particular, this created a barrier between us and the leading character during the earlier scenes. We were told that he was filled with conflicting thoughts and feelings, beneath his outward correctitude—but we were never really admitted to his mind, and so could not enter into his experience with any sense of human, individual shock, when the incident on the Damascus road changed the course of his life.

The Deanery Players gave an excellent performance, of which any new dramatist could be proud. Most of the parts in a long cast list were well played. The player of St. Paul was the most convincing I have ever seen, giving us the nervous, fiery, self-conscious personality, and at the same time making it clear why Paul was so deeply loved.

The costumes had been specially designed, and were most imaginative, using rich yellow and flame colour with great effect. The Priests were notably impressive, their stiff towering figures reminiscent of Sarastro in **The Magic Flute**, and it was exciting to find from the programme that all costumes were "made by members and friends of the Society."—B.J.

* * *

Hornchurch, Essex

On Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, members of the congregation of Holy Cross Church, Hornchurch, presented the Passion Play **Redemption** by Freda Collins.

The play was performed with great reverence and was a true act of worship and witness in which the congregation were able to share by joining in the Creed and the singing of "When I survey the wondrous Cross."

Performed in the Church, the play opened and ended with a spotlight shining on the altar Cross. Throughout the whole production, the skilled use of lighting effects and recorded music did much to create the atmosphere of the dread days leading to the Crucifixion, followed by the glory of the

Resurrection. Surely, the Risen Christ was in our midst and by portraying God we were better able to understand God.

It is hoped that a Religious Drama Group will be formed in Holy Cross Parish so that in these days of "visual aids" the Church may witness in the modern idiom.

Hull

The Company of the Way, the inter-denominational group attached to the city church of St. Mary Lowgate, was out and about at Christmas and Epiphany. Its double bill of Hilary Pepler's *The Ox and the Ass* and Henri Ghéon's *The Journey of the Three Kings* was played in ten churches in Hull and Beverley.

This group has been brought into being to stimulate the churches in Hull and to concentrate on plays which are worthy of performance, at as high a standard as possible. Membership is drawn from over 20 churches in the city, and a number of ex-professionals are included in the Company.

The Company's next venture will be in connection with a Festival of the Arts at St. Mary's in June, which the Vicar, the Revd. Frank Glendenning has arranged. The Archbishop of York has specially commissioned James Kirkup to write a play based on the Life of St. Hilda, whose 1,300th anniversary it is this year. After the St. Mary's Arts Festival, the Company plans to take the play to a number of centres in the York Diocese.—F.G.

Johannesburg, S. Africa

South Africa cannot yet be said to be religious drama minded, but during Passion and Holy Week in Johannesburg this year, a new Passion play, *The Husetop*, by the Rev. C. C. Tugman, was produced at the Y.M.C.A. Intimate Theatre. A good play, well produced and acted, it has set Johannesburg a high standard in religious drama, and attracted good audiences not only from church but also from theatre-goers. The play is one which will be heard of again.—M.S.

Kingston, Surrey

An unusual and startling treatment

was accorded *Christ in the Concrete City* by the Kingston Baptist Church group, in the Tudor Hall on the evening of Good Friday. A packed audience witnessed a truly remarkable study in lighting—shadowgraphy, sound effects—music, and the spoken word. For originality and imagination and a cast who were excitingly vivid and talented, the production was a gem. There was, however, a debit side. The surrealistic set, obviously the work of skill and even daring, suggested little if anything of relevance to the play; the narrator, seated on a stepladder throughout, observed, summed up and made his points coldly, in a tone pattern bordering on monotony.

The speed of the play, theatrical, admirable, suppressed the horror peaks and the truths of the play as meditation, and the touches of realism (e.g., the writhing shadow figure during the scourging, and the live clink of hammer on nails in the crucifixion scene) denied the audience participation through imagination, and paradoxically destroyed illusion. For all that, the technical and artistic components of this particular presentation, were unique, stimulating and of the highest order.—H.B.

Liverpool

The Bishop's Players

For the first time "The Bishop's Players" entered a team in the British Drama League Annual Festival at the David Lewis Theatre. The play chosen was *The Apple Tree* by B. M. Clemens, which is based on the life of Caedmon, the first English poet of the seventh century, who when a cowherd at Whitby Abbey was inspired to sing the glories of God's Creation.

Eleven teams took part in the B.D.L. Contest, and although "The Bishop's Players" were not chosen to go forward to the divisional finals, they were awarded a place in Class A with 75 per cent. marks; and Mr. Hugh Taylor, who played the part of Caedmon, was awarded the prize for the best individual performance of the Festival.

Frequently religious drama can be seen that does not reach the high standard of secular drama, and it was gratifying therefore, that in the first

appearance of "The Bishop's Players" at a Drama Festival, that was in the main secular, religious drama was not unworthily put into the picture.

H.S.A.

Newcastle, Staffs

For their 1957 production, the Newcastle Christian Drama Society returned to stage production with Gordon Daviot's play about Abraham and Isaac, *The Little Dry Thorn*. For this occasion, they had assembled a talented cast who thoroughly enjoyed playing their parts, and especially drawing out the humour of the play. After some very hard work from the cast, the audiences realised that it was not unchristian to laugh at the very human predicaments of the characters. Because of this the moving moments of this play were understood and greatly appreciated.

The setting was very simple, but the home-produced costumes were suitable and most colourful. Audiences at the two centres in the Borough in which the play was presented will long remember the experience. In the words of the Society's President, the Rev. Edgar Preston, this was "probably the best written play the Society has yet done."

Southwark

The Way of the Cross

However it happened, the Southwark Cathedral Retro-Choir Easter presentation, completed for this reviewer, what had been an intensive search covering many years—a final distillation of pure worship—from the basic elements of drama.

One can only hazard guesses as to how this was achieved; certainly it was due to a uniform background of theatrical experience on the part of the (24/25?) players—some of the "out-of-the-crowd" characters being obviously without the wish that no amount of sincerity could hide; but amazingly, in this production, and for the first time in this theatre's experience, these instances were in no way distracting, nor did they impede the sweep and progress of the presentation. Was it Ghéon's exquisite balance and selection, and

those magnificent agonising silences at the end of each Station which converted dramatic illusion to a rich essence of worship and offering? It is impossible to say; but the dust of the Dolorosa, the unspeakable horror and dreadful import of Calvary, and finally, our Lord's conquest of death, were living events of the moment.

If there was one jarring note in this taut yet tender production, it was the apocryphal miracle of Station Six—which obviously cannot be accepted by a majority of the Reformed Faith, and thereby suspends momentarily, the continuity of a participating worshipping attitude; this of course is no criticism of the production, but is presented as a point of possible interest and debate.

Here was no "drilled" production—the beautiful grouping and gesture, though "right" were anything but contrived. Nor, to clear up a misconception, was it a "modern dress" presentation in the sense that *The Vigil*—*Family Portrait* and Shakespearean productions are occasionally presented in modern dress. Costumes were carefully and unostentatiously of to-day, and therefore timeless.

Miss Ursula Nicholl may or may not be fully aware of what her inspiration and direction achieved; I would like to suggest that it was beauty, holiness and truth.

A member of the cast writes:

A cast of about twenty persons, dressed in modern style moving with modern gesture, brought home to the congregation that we of to-day are, by inheritance, just as responsible for the Crucifixion as the spectators along the road to Calvary. By very careful reallocation of the lines in this classic of Passion Plays, excellent balance was maintained between good and evil, the latter being played very strongly, in order to throw into greater relief the good which prevails in the repetition of the Reciter's quatrain at the end of each Station.

The feeling of alliance between the congregation and the action was strengthened by the fact that the progress along the Road was played round three sides of the congregation, in what might be termed "anti-arena" style.

CHRISTIAN DRAMA

In each Station, the figure of our Lord was seen through the eyes of the cast, who, by concerted team work, placed the Figure in exactly the right position. Also, by rehearsal almost to saturation point, each person knew their precise position on the set at any given point of the play.

By the untiring efforts of the producer, and by the help of constant prayer, there could not have been a single mind in the congregation which harboured any doubt that "Christ is Risen."—D.C.

Wesley's Chapel, E.C.1

Miracle at Midnight

This play was presented by a group of young players with understanding, spiritual insight and a burning desire to share their knowledge with the congregation. The play depends on arguments which can, in performance, easily become obscured by the action unless the players themselves keep the interwoven threads clearly in mind. In this production the message clearly and sincerely shone through. The rather difficult physical conditions under which it was played—on a stage in a side aisle of Wesley's Chapel—were used with imagination and dramatic validity. The "Herd," who has become "outside time," plaintively piped his way onto the stage through the large, dark, pew-filled wilderness of the main part of the Chapel, and the Waits, who sang carols at intervals during the action, trod their measured way to and from all corners of the building. Unaccompanied singing is not easy but these four "Waits" added character and sincerity to the performance by their standard of achievement.

There was a certain inexperience among some of the players but the team work was such that the performance was bound into an integral whole and lifted onto a higher level by one or two members of the cast.

Using a "set" in a place of worship is always difficult and perhaps the very excellent stylised setting would have fitted better into a hall, while "golf shots" down the aisle are not easily acceptable. The lighting was good and much thought had been given to it but was a little "obvious" at times.

This was a good production which attained its object: the presenting Art Form of a Spiritual Truth and was a pity that there were not more people there to witness it. This young and inexperienced group has achieved much, they should now aspire to achieve more.—U.N.

Westcombe Park, S.E.3

Saviour of Mankind

This is a difficult play to perform, it is composed of a number of short scenes which, for continuous playing, necessitates the actors frequently entering and exiting in blackout. Some of the scenes are commented on by Verse Speaking Chorus which at other times takes on the character of Bandstanders and ordinary men and women. The verse is frequently undramatic, ponderous giving no scope for movement or dramatic interpretation, speakers being forced into inaction and "choral" speaking.

This group of players, although inexperienced, took the situation firmly in hand and by hard work, high aspiration and sincere devotion gave a presentation through which the Christian message of Christmas flowed strongly. The technical difficulties were overcome by minute attention to details of production and the individual actors conveyed a conviction in performance which carried them over some roughness of technique. The play was made to live. The choral speaking was exceptionally clear with every word audible, a considerable achievement for several people speaking in unison, and much study had obviously been given to the content of the verse which, however, would have profited from a more varied and dramatic delivery.

There was much original grouping, the players being half back or full back to the congregation. This is a difficult approach to attempt but was in the case successful the effects being heightened by the lighting. This was directed from side angles, almost silhouetting the players at times, keeping them fully visible and changing with the mood of the action.

This was a sensitive production in which individual effort, team work and

creative imagination all played their part. It is hoped that this Group will perform again next year and progress further step along the road they have begun to tread.—U.N.

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West Suffolk

Murder in the Cathedral

The producer writes:

In February, 1956, at the suggestion of the Rural Community Council, I began to think of the production of T. S. Eliot's classical verse play. Here was a way of introducing this wonderfully inspiring play to people who could run a mile if it were suggested that they should *listen* to such a thing—much less take part in it.

I had at various times seen verse plays and been inexpressibly bored by the chorus of men or women chanting fearfully, and with tinny modern voices, an endless succession of words, words, words. After reading **Murder in the Cathedral**, I decided to produce it realistically, feeling strongly that symbolism in the arts makes a considerable demand on the imaginative reception, for thought and experience of the power.

The Rural Community Council readily consented to sponsor the production.

The Women of Canterbury were chosen from actresses in village drama groups within the county. At first they were terrified when approached to act in a verse play, but gradually it held them in its sway.

The costumes were designed and made locally, with the exception of the monks' robes, which were lent by the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral. A mixture of the vestments used (and left behind at Sens Cathedral where he died in exile) by Thomas à Becket, was sent to the R.C.C., and the robes worn by Thomas were freely copied from this picture.

We had been approached by a department of the Foreign Office to see whether something could be done to interest the personnel of the U.S.A.A.F. units stationed in Suffolk, some of whom were keen on acting, which they had done at College. I contacted the bases, and offered to take into the production some of the men who would care to act

as attendants. To my surprise, they accepted with alacrity, and we had a happy mixture of English and American in the production.

The play was performed for three nights at the Cathedral Church of St. James, Bury St. Edmunds, where the interest aroused by the production was immense. The Mayor of Aldeburgh came to see it, and as a consequence an invitation has been received to perform the play at the Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts.

It was performed again in October at Long Melford Church, and finally, at Ely Cathedral, the result being a wonderfully moving, gripping production . . .

Ely and Ribe Cathedral, Denmark, have adopted each other, and on a visit to Ribe the Dean of Ely talked of the performance, and out of these discussions came an invitation to perform the play at Ribe Cathedral and at Roskilde Cathedral, near Copenhagen, in June, 1957.

* * * Tetherdown (Muswell Hill)

On Wednesday and Thursday in Holy Week the Drama Group presented as part of the Church's Easter Festival, Philip W. Turner's **Christ in the Concrete City**.

This impressive play, of which the author himself says "as entertainment it would be blasphemy," seeks to show how the petty sins of our everyday lives are the very ones that crucified Jesus—spiritual pride, cowardice and political time-serving, brutality and lust for blood, and a blind following of the majority.

The main events of the Passion are re-enacted, interspersed with swift transitions to dialogue exemplifying the counterparts of these events in modern life. A narrator and chorus link the sequences and keep the audience sensitive to the points being made. A most moving and realistic picture of the Crucifixion and the events leading up to it is presented and the unseen presence of Christ truly felt.

The play had been well publicised by handbills circulated in the neighbourhood of the church, and many visitors helped to fill Tetherdown Hall on both evenings. It is hoped that this

evangelistic effort will bear fruit in future days. After the Thursday performance a communion service in the church was attended by the cast and about a hundred members and friends.

May the "reporter" add just a personal note? She was so impressed with the Crucifixion sequence that, as the light faded on those two women at the foot of the Cross, she could almost have wished the play had ended there. After all, in our celebrations, Easter was still to come.—*From the Parish magazine.*

* * *

Hendon

The Figure on the Cross

I went to see this play full of curiosity and apprehension. But from the moment of the plainsong entry into St. Mary's Church, Hendon, I became part of a pilgrimage to the Cross. The words of the first invocation were not clear, but the meaning was sufficiently clear to draw the whole congregation into the presentation, whose most striking feature was the excellent blending of the voices of two women of quite different ages. Not only was their tone good, but their words could be heard more clearly than any others. The men's chorus was indistinct, being dominated by one voice. The reality of the miming of the Crucifixion brought home the horror of such a death. The most dramatic moment was the startling drum roll and the cry of "Crucify Him." The drums between the scenes maintained the suspense, but the trumpet didn't achieve the triumphant note intended. The only part of the play which seemed artificial was the soldier returning to his friend's mother—it was difficult to separate the mother mourning her soldier son in this scene from the refugee woman mourning her dead baby in a previous scene. I particularly appreciated the Desert and the Prison scenes, and thought the final scene of a boy holding the blossoming Cross a fitting climax to an unusual religious experience.

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John Keble Church, Mill Hill, N.W.7

Wherever *Christ in the Concrete City* is produced it seems to arouse a

buzz of comment and discussion ranging from the frankly abusive to the wildly enthusiastic. The production at John Keble Church, Mill Hill, for Easter, was no exception. The high standard of performance and general sensitive production of Harold Bennet brought out the full impact of the most disturbing play of the Passion. The historical scenes were well characterised with a skilful use of costumes and cloaks, but the great power of the production lay in the vivid way in which the linking choral passages were brought to life. The economy and punch of the words were reflected in the simplicity of the action. Each scene was clear-cut and its point driven home. The technical difficulties of moving from scene to scene were managed quietly and the pauses enhanced rather than detracted from the effect. In fact the first performance was played too fast, and, coupled with the producer's natural desire to use the full the big playing area and the linked entrances, this gave it a rather breathless quality which was eliminated in later performances mainly by slow speaking. This is a difficult play to finish. The Resurrection scene is most well written and in this one instance the production failed to emphasise the modern parallel to Mary Magdalene: "He called my name and I knew Him." The players were turning to mount the rostra for the final tableau during the brief words "Christ goes before you into Galilee . . . Galilee Street . . . where he waits to move in . . ." The result was that the audience was left with the terrifying picture of our own share in the guilt of the Crucifixion without the balancing impact of the signposting of the Way of Salvation.

J.W.

I was greatly impressed by the imaginative and lively production. There was a quality of "ordinariness" mixed with understanding which helped us to identify ourselves with the players, thus realising our responsibility for the Passion of Our Lord.

Well done, John Keble Drama Group.—CARINA ROBINS.